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SUBJECT: RELIGION IN SENEGAL: THE CATHOLICS

REF: A. DAKAR 1378
[1](#)B. DAKAR 1286

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Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JAY T. SMITH FOR R
EASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: This is the third in a series of cables analyzing religion in Senegal. This cable concerns Catholics in Senegal. With a long established history, the Catholics are Senegal,s largest religious minority and continue to wield far greater influence in the country,s political, economic, educational, and religious affairs than their numbers would suggest. In discussions with a broad spectrum of members from the community, the general consensus is that they remain strong, well organized, and optimistic about their future in the country. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (U) According to source materials, Catholicism has been around in the region that is now Senegal since the 15th century going through various stages of growth and decline depending on who was ruling the territory. According to a 2001 census, there were 331,175 registered Catholics in Senegal divided across seven dioceses, of which Dakar is by far the most populous. The Dakar Diocese, which was founded in its current state in 1955, is headed by Cardinal Theodore Adrien Sarr who was given his red hat in November 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI. The newest diocese is the Diocese of Kolda in the Casamance region in southern Senegal. Founded in 2000, this area has the second highest concentration of Catholics outside of Dakar. While Dakar is the oldest modern diocese, the Diocese of St. Louis dates back, in one form or another, to 1779 when St. Louis was once and for all retaken by the French. The Church has an extensive and very informative website at www.senkto.org.

We,re Doing Fine

[1](#)3. (C) In all the conversations that PolOff had with Church leaders and prominent Catholics, there was general agreement that they remain secure, well-employed, influential, and free from discrimination. The only significant complaint was that President Abdoulaye Wade, unlike his predecessors, is much less sensitive to the needs of the community and that he has to be prompted to remember not only Catholics but also other minorities when making cabinet or other senior appointments, for example.

[1](#)4. (C) "I am comfortable in this country, and have no problems interacting with anybody," said Honore-Georges Ndiaye, the respected Catholic director of MALAO (an NGO that

is fighting to eradicate small arms and weapons). He went on to say, "Catholics are not discriminated against. In fact, many prominent Senegalese, both in government and in business, attended our schools because their parents knew that they would get a quality education. We are prominent in the University of Cheikh Anta Diop where many senior professors are Catholics. Education is where we shine. The same applies in the workplace. We are seen as good, competent, colleagues, although less so as leaders. In the past, we used to have great leaders, in addition to (former) President (Leopold) Senghor. However, that is less the case these days. Under Wade we are not excluded per se but we are not particularly at the forefront either. He's just indifferent and seems to lack the vision to respect the various forces of our nation."

15. (C) Cardinal Sarr echoed much of what Ndiaye had to say during a discussion with Political Counselor and PolOff. According to him, "First and foremost, the Constitution is a secular document and, as a result, the State recognizes all religions. We have never had problems in practicing our faith. We manage our schools and our hospitals and the Church remains respected. We continue to have a say both in (national) government and locally. In fact, I have worked with other religious leaders on many occasions on issues that are important to the people. Also, look at the last presidential election where Robert Sagna (The mayor of the southern city of Ziguinchor) did very well. He did not win, but his campaign was well received by the people." However, Sarr did acknowledge that Wade had sought to eliminate the word "laicit" (secularism) from the Constitution in 2001. Moreover, the Cardinal went on to say that the activities of some Evangelical denominations worried him because, in their fervor to proselytize and convert as many people as quickly as possible, they could upset the fine balance that exists

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between Christians and Muslims. "Sometimes they go too far," he said.

Wade Too Partisan?

16. (C) The view that President Wade favors the Mourides (the Muslim brotherhood to which he belongs) and that he is not neutral, unlike his predecessors, was shared by many of our interlocutors. Cardinal Sarr agreed with this sentiment but qualified his statement by saying, "Sure, Wade is a little more partisan and he is not as politically neutral as (former Presidents) Senghor or (Abdou) Diouf. But he has helped us a lot in the past and his children went to Catholic schools."

17. (C) Helene Tine, the spokesperson for former Prime Minister Moustafa Niasse's party, said former President Senghor managed to remain equidistant between the two most prominent Muslim brotherhoods even though he was great friends with the second Caliph of the Mourides, Sergine Fallilou Mbacke (the father of the current Caliph-General). Moreover, according to her, despite being a Catholic, Senghor never appeared to favor the Catholic community. "Historically, we have not had any problems, but under this regime we are somewhat weaker than before. The problem is that Wade has always presented himself as a Mouride and this has led to an erosion of the relationship that exists between the various brotherhoods. So, actually, we are not the only ones who are affected by his position," she said.

The Rise of Radical Islam

18. (C) When asked about the rise of radical Islam in Senegal, the Cardinal said, "These groups are not in confrontation with Christians. Yes, the number of women who are covering up has increased, but so far we have had no problems. That being said, if they gain influence, their attitude may change, so it is difficult to say what Senegal will look like

five years from now." Papal Nuncio Archbishop Luis Mariano Montemayor expressed a similar view, opining that worldwide Islam is going through a revival. According to Montemayor, "Senegal is not immune from this revival due to the overtures that Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, have made in the region. We have also noted a new rigidity among the Mourides and, unlike in the past, there is less interaction between Muslims and Christians, especially on the social level. I think that is in part due to the influence of fundamentalist groups (Note: The Papal Nuncio underlined that by fundamentalist he did not mean terrorist, but groups that adhered to a strict interpretation of the Koran. End Note)."

¶9. (C) The Nuncio also worries that the traditionally tight bond between a marabout (Muslim religious guide) and a talibe (Muslim student or disciple), which often translates into blind obedience, combined with a more aggressive form of Islam might create problems. However, he did acknowledge that at the moment the fringe groups remain just that, but warned that their influence was growing. Montemayor confided that his mentor, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who heads the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, was particularly worried about the growing influence of fundamentalist Islam in West Africa.

Another Catholic President?

¶10. (C) When asked if Senegal is ever likely to have another Catholic president, Sarr responded, "It,s possible, but not in the current context as I do not really see a personality that people could follow." Ndiaye agreed that, in theory, a Catholic could eventually become president again. However, in practice, he argued, "There are too many societal forces at play. Politics here is done in families, be they religious or ethnic. Also, money plays a really important role and there are just not that many rich Catholics to bankroll such a run. In the end, I don,t see a Catholic beating, say, a Mouride candidate in a run-off. Another problem is that not many Catholics are interested in gaining political power."

Comment

¶11. (C) While there may be some small areas of concern, the Catholics of Senegal remain a respected community that are very much in control of their own destiny. When the-then Archbishop Sarr was elevated to Cardinal, he was greeted by tens of thousands of well-wishers upon his return to Senegal

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from the Vatican. The country remains religiously tolerant and Catholics play an important part in its development, especially in education. Meanwhile, there does seem to be some worry among Catholic leaders about the growing influence of fundamentalist or orthodox Islam. However, it seems clear they remain optimistic about their community's future in the country. Nevertheless, it is also clear that President Wade is willing to flirt with the idea of crossing the proverbial Rubicon with regard to mixing politics and religion. While the country remains tolerant, it is no longer taboo to rely on the backing of the caliphs or to involve them in political matters. Former Prime Minister and recently deposed President of the National Assembly Macky Sall and presidential son Karim Wade are both likely to lean heavily on their religious affiliations as Mourides in any future presidential run. As a result of this politicization of religion, it is difficult to see a Catholic ever being president again. End Comment.
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